In Value's Shadows: Devaluation as Accumulation Frontier

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Devaluation is the shadow haunting every capitalist fantasy of endless accumulation. Its ever-present threat, in competitive capitalist struggles and recurrent economic crises, compels capital forward to enclosures of new values and to new realms, techniques, and geographies of production and surplus extraction. It drives bitter struggles among capitalists as different actors, sectors, and places strive to deflect the ravages of devaluation "elsewhere" – with profound consequences for the human and environmental geographies "brought in", altered, and/or destroyed in such processes. These competitive devaluations, crisis-fueled jostlings, and transformations have a long history. With this special issue, however, we seek to open a lens onto contemporary encounters with devaluation that *are* novel in significant, yet insufficiently explored ways. Articles collected here consider new forms of value destruction and biophysical wasting as capital compulsively seeks to reproduce itself on an expanded scale – global-systemic and intimate transformations reflected in mainstream narratives of the Anthropocene and a so-called "used" planet (Ellis et al. 2013). Simultaneously, these articles interrogate qualitatively novel ways in which such devaluations have been recast as *opportunities* for capital accumulation, whether during acute crises or in the context of capitalist volatility-as-usual. Taken as a collection, they forge new analytical ground by illuminating parallels and interrelations between sites of de- and re-valuation usually considered separately: industrial obsolescence and waste-to-resource schemes; rural landscape degradation and ecological restoration; urban blight and redevelopment/gentrification; collapsed financial asset prices and new forms of speculation; and beyond. This discussion suggests key lineaments of an expanded theory of devaluation for capitalism's contemporary moment – and makes a case for the significance and vitality of such an agenda for further geographic research.

In drawing out these articulations, this collection connects empirical and theoretical programs from urban and economic geography with research agendas more common to political ecology, linkages which we draw out in overview form here. We argue that maintaining such conversations across these entangled (McCarthy 2012), yet often divergent fields is both generative and necessary for speaking to the contemporary moment (and to the Capitalocene, following Haraway 2015 and Moore 2017). Such engagement produces new insights into connections between economic de- and revaluation, on the one hand, and physical deterioration of all kinds, on the other. Investigating structural causes of socio-ecological degradation has long been a foundation of political ecological research (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987), while there have been more recent calls for the field to engage more deeply with theories of value (Kenney-Lazar and Kay 2017, Robertson and Wainwright 2013, Walker 2017). Interrogating processes of devaluation alongside environmental degradation is increasingly relevant as political ecology responds to mainstream claims that commodifying nature(s) will prevent degradation—and growing apprehension that planetary scale degradation and climate change-related devaluations threaten the reproduction of capitalism as a whole (Ekers and Prudham 2015, Knuth 2017).

Meanwhile, capital's own encounters with degradation and devaluation are increasingly ambiguous. Investors of all kinds are developing tools to convert devalued assets and degraded

landscapes into opportunities for accumulation. These strategies go beyond the economic renewal enabled by war and political-natural disasters. For example, economic geographers and political economists have investigated how real estate investors use accounting techniques and discourses about obsolescence to facilitate urban redevelopment, gentrification, and property speculation (Hanchett 1996, Weber 2002). Others have examined "shorting" practices in financial markets and speculative investment in distressed financial assets, from Manhattan real estate to sovereign debt (e.g., Gowan 1999, Teresa 2016, Potts 2017). Meanwhile, environmental economic geographers and political ecologists have investigated how new markets are reframing waste, damaged habitats, and other degraded things and spaces as economic opportunities. They have considered new profit-driven schemes for ecosystem restoration (Robertson 2000, Lave et al. 2010), new pathways for re-valuing "wastes"/"wastelands" and degraded urban and rural environments (Baka 2013, Dillon 2014, Gidwani and Reddy 2011, Goldstein 2014), and old and new ways of turning industrial and household waste streams—and, increasingly, risk itself—into capitalist resources (e.g., Gregson and Crang 2010; 2018, Johnson 2014, Knapp 2016, Romero 2016).

This special issue gathers papers that develop precise empirical and conceptual engagements with these new accumulation frontiers from a geographical perspective. Sibilia explores multiple forms of devaluation threatening today's volatile global shipping sector—and its distinctively "mobile" industrial fixed capital—and alternative strategies for waste-to-resource revaluation and spatio-temporal displacement that are evolving in response. Knuth investigates interconnected "economies of repair" emerging around energy efficiency, as green capitalists market energy waste(-averted) as a novel immaterial resource and deteriorated urban built environments as value-in-waiting for profit-driven retrofitting. Whiteside interrogates how the neoliberal Canadian state has conceptually devalued its public land holdings since the 1990s, dispossessed them, and re-valued them for private profit, via an array of bureaucratic, accounting, and discursive tools. Finally, Cantor and Knuth examine the speculative politics of ecological restoration and geothermal energy development at California's Salton Sea, as the challenges of a "postnatural" environment combine with fiscal austerity and regional water-energy-land conflicts to spark profit-driven restoration schemes.

Common themes across these papers include close engagements with the entangled socio-materialities of degradation and de-/re-valuation; questions of their temporality and scale, both material and performatively narrated; the role of the neoliberal state in these processes; and the injustices to labor and environments of turning waste and destruction into resources in the first place. All of the papers attend to vital materialities (e.g., Bennett 2009, Gregson and Crang 2010) of devaluation: how ineluctable entropic forces and lively biophysical processes shape the dissolution and obduracy/intransigence of real property, fixed capital, and second natures. At the same time, the papers show how forces of physical degradation operate in dialectical relation to social influences propelling the maintenance or neglect/abandonment of things, structures, and spaces. Knuth shows how poverty and disinvestment have shaped the US urban energy landscape historically, including in the production of energy "waste"; and how urban obsolescence today is conditioned by structural technological change, transformations in energy-industrial regimes, and real estate and architectural fashions. Whiteside analyzes how state austerity and discourses about "surplus" and (in)efficiency have worked in in conjunction with changing appraisal practices to facilitate specific forms of de- and then re-valuation. Sibilia considers how both

standard industrial obsolescence and structural economic crises have produced vast numbers of "excess" ships. Cantor and Knuth present the Salton Sea—and its degraded, precarious future—as a system and state overdetermined by human and beyond-human shaping factors; biophysical, legal, discursive, and political economic.

This attention to the social components of physical degradation is particularly significant given recurrent attempts to naturalize devaluation and its temporalities, chronic and acute—and all too often normalize capitalism's compulsion to foreshorten the "lives" of things and spaces. See, for example, Knuth's critiques of US discourses about buildings' "natural" lifespan and of property "filtering" as an affordable housing strategy, or Whiteside's discussion of the Canadian state's efforts to normalize a "lifecycle" for public property holdings. Sibilia's discussion of the concept of "shipping cycles"— a term that imposes a deceptive temporal order and predictability onto unstable, qualitatively in flux sectoral dynamics—is also telling in light of Weber's (2016) recent critique of the similarly questionable, yet enduringly performative, notion of urban "property cycles". Meanwhile, Cantor and Knuth show the equally powerful work performed by discourses of the unnatural—and perhaps now "postnatural"—and how such conceptual devaluations can hasten the morbidity and death of particular environments.

Some of the issue's papers consider such de- and re-valuation temporalities further. Capitalist schemes for re-valuation in particular places and sectors confront broader structural imperatives in a restless system. Knuth, for instance, explores the contradictory logics between short term profits from urban energy retrofitting and the need for sustained maintenance into the future to make this a successful decarbonization strategy. In a different vein, Sibilia draws on a posthumously published article by Neil Smith (2017) to more closely consider the relationship between "progressive" (ongoing competitive) and "periodic" (crisis-driven) devaluations. Notably, her account highlights the dialectical relationship between these forms—a crucial point for further investigation in the context of increasing financial, social, and ecological volatility. Acute crises may produce sharp bursts of accumulation by dispossession, and opportunistic exploitation by actors such as hedge funds. At the same time, such experiences may generate enduring new strategies for de- and re-valuation, and novel production geographies—see, for example, the transformation from scrapping to shipbreaking that Sibilia discusses.

Another important point of connection across the papers is the role of the neoliberal state in effecting both de- and re-valuation. Devaluation has long been central to geographical theories of crisis, as capital fixed in existing infrastructure and regions simultaneously permits value extraction and becomes a weight on new accumulation (Harvey 1982). Geographers have pointed out the growing power of the financial sector to manage its own exposure to devaluation by exporting its costs from debtors to creditors, from the private sector to the state, or from one investor to another (e.g., Crump et al. 2008; Christophers and Niedt 2016; Potts 2018). The papers in this issue consider the role of states in this process as well. Neoliberalism has never meant the withdrawal of the state, but rather its retooling to support market-based accumulations. The papers in this issue demonstrate that states have not only contributed to devaluation through disinvestment, but also to making devalued assets available for (corporate) re-valuation. In the context of austerity politics and neoliberal ideologies, claims that privatization and/or public-private partnerships can make the restoration of devalued or degraded sites "self-financing" and self-sustaining have proliferated (see especially Whiteside and Cantor and Knuth here). Yet, the

evidence in these papers shows that even in such cases states continue to play an important role in mediating the relationship between the stubborn materialities of devalued land and built environments, on the one hand, and capital, on the other. Authors consider varying governmental practices such as support for large-scale waste reprocessing industries and domestic reuse as a developmental state strategy (Sibilia); energy audits, record-keeping and tax incentives that make the immaterial resource of energy efficiency a value-able asset (Knuth); intentional devaluations of public lands in order to make them ripe for privatization and then revaluation (Whiteside); and public-private partnerships that outsource costly ecological restoration projects to the private sector—purportedly advancing conservation, public health *and* private profits simultaneously (Cantor and Knuth).

Finally, papers in this special issue consider the enduring costs and injustices to labor and environments involved in turning degraded things into opportunities for accumulation. Sibilia's intervention contributes new insights into discussions of the globally uneven production and risk geographies of shipbreaking, among other waste-to-resource frontiers (see, for example, Gregson et al. 2016). The spaces in which devalued objects are repurposed for rent streams remain all too frequently countries/sites with constrained regulatory capacity to implement labor standards and environmental protection, reducing the economic costs of re-valuing waste and bolstering capitalists' profits. Shipbreaking's workers—as with laborers working with wastes generally—are exposed to dangerous and toxic substances, a "slow violence" of bodily absorption of wastes/harms through direct exposure and via chemical leakage into land and waterways. Cantor and Knuth point out the potential risks to already-marginalized Latino farmworkers as the Salton Sea is rendered an anthropogenic "sacrifice zone" in favor of development and conservation interests elsewhere, whether federally protected deserts or agro-industrial farmland. The concept of sacrifice zones implicitly conjures up hierarchies of value, both through the deflected development of differentially valued landscapes (Hecht 2005) and through the people and land that are either left behind in processes of re-valuation and thus considered as lacking value, or are actually harmed by such processes. Knuth's analysis of energy efficiency programs such as building retrofitting considers multiple hidden costs; for example, longstanding suggestions that energy efficiencies and intensified energy usage may grow *together*, negating the original savings and their ostensible environmental benefits. Retrofitting may also contribute to so-called "green" gentrification. As a growing literature now argues, efforts to re-develop brownfields, abandoned infrastructure, and urban wastes/wasteland frequently increase adjacent property values, presenting new rents for capture by property developers and exacerbated risks of eviction and displacement for already marginalized communities.

In all cases, the contributors in this special issue draw attention to the fact that the people and places—whether wittingly or unwittingly—enrolled in the "dirty work" (Gregson et al. 2016) of transforming devalued assets and land into fresh opportunities for capital investment are bound up in unequal power relations and geographies. Moreover, the processes of de- to re-valuation highlighted here also raise the question of whether accumulation of and through degradation ever ends: if the uptake of devalued assets into novel value streams produces ever more negative consequences for labor and environments—new degradations and devaluations—and thus further opportunities for capital accumulation through re-valuation. Future research might, then, look to new ways in which capital's attempts to manipulate de- and re-valuation *fail*, and what such failures mean: how the degraded and devalued defy strategic (re)assimilation, and how radically

new sources and forms of devaluation ultimately threaten capitalism's ability to reproduce itself. If these threats cannot be "brought in" as engines for accumulation, they suggest fresh crises, as well as opportunities for political intervention.

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